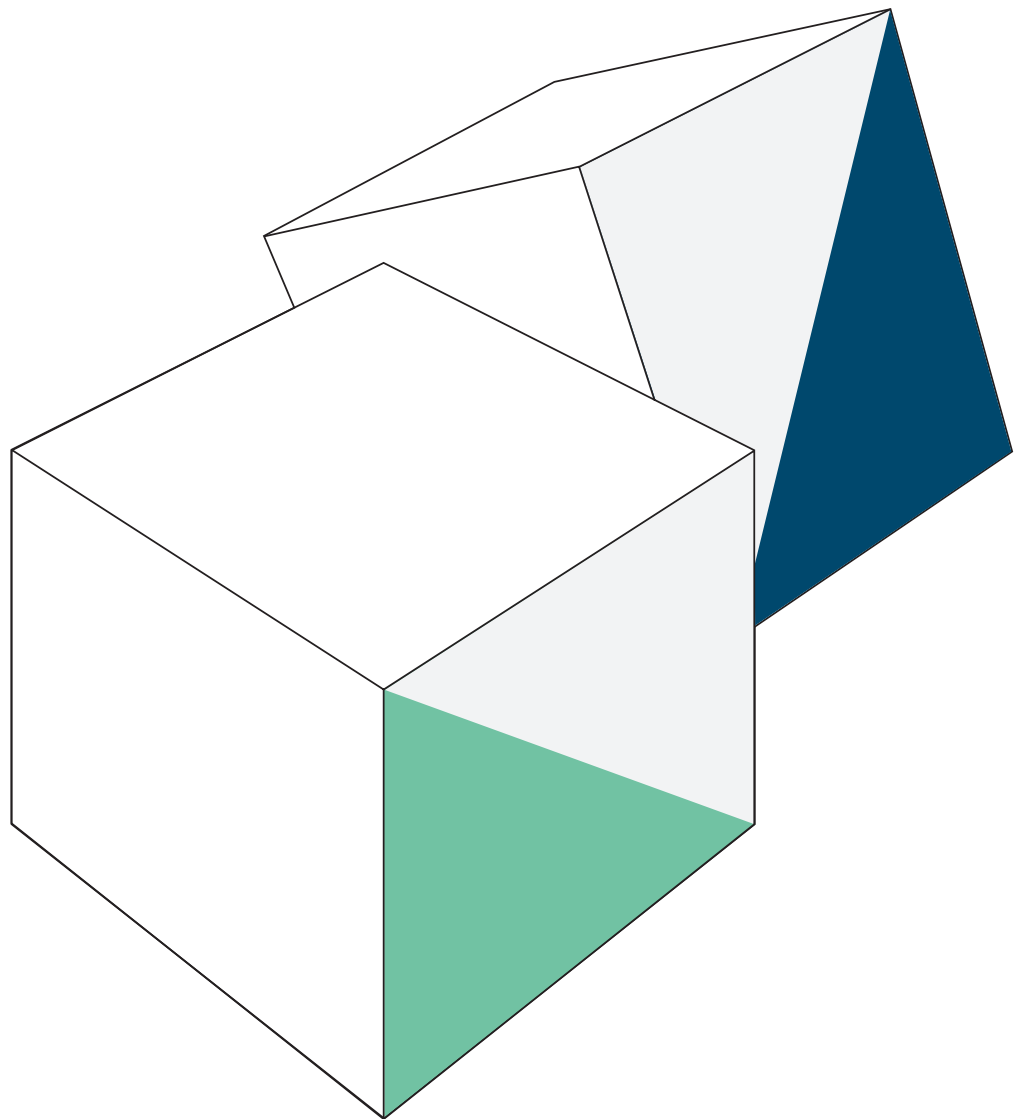


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Theorizing University Rankings. A Comparative Research Perspective

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Theorizing University Rankings. A Comparative Research Perspective

Jelena Brankovic, Leopold Ringel, Tobias Werron

Abstracts

In this paper we lay down a comparative framework for theorizing university rankings. In so doing, we wish to contextualize the analysis of university rankings within a broader sociology of rankings. We employ analogical theorizing to bring insights from the arts and sports fields into the study of university rankings. We identify two dimensions along which such theorizing could be done: (a) systematic, referring to the comparison of university rankings with rankings in other fields and focusing on how university rankings can be informed by insights from other empirical settings; and (b) historical, which concerns long-term trajectories, rather than just the last few years. This approach, we argue, can benefit both our understanding of university rankings and rankings more generally.

Der Artikel entwickelt eine vergleichende Perspektive auf Universitätsrankings. Unser Ziel ist, die Analyse von Universitätsrankings in eine allgemeine Soziologie der Rankings einzubetten und Erkenntnisse über Rankings in anderen Feldern – hier Sport und Kunst – für die Erforschung von Universitätsrankings fruchtbar zu machen. Zu diesem Zweck unterscheiden wir zwei Vergleichsperspektiven: (a) eine systematisch vergleichende Perspektive, die Universitätsrankings mit ähnlichen Vergleichspraktiken in anderen Feldern vergleicht; (b) eine historisch vergleichende Perspektive, die Rankings und ähnliche Vergleichspraktiken über längere Zeitverläufe miteinander vergleicht. Ein beide Perspektiven verknüpfender Ansatz, so unsere These, schärft nicht nur unseren Blick auf Universitätsrankings, sondern auch auf Rankings im Allgemeinen.

Introduction

For more than a decade now, rankings have occupied a central place in the higher education and science studies (Hazelkorn 2015; Rindova et al. 2017). Scholars across the social science

disciplines have contributed to the debate on what constitutes rankings, how they are produced and to what end, and especially on how rankings affect universities, policy makers, and academics. This has resulted in an impressive and still growing body of literature on the topic of university rankings alone. Meanwhile, rankings have dramatically proliferated. Various rankings and rankers can now be found in a growing number of fields, as well as at virtually any level from local to global. Restaurants, accounting firms, hospitals, pharmaceutical companies, nation-states, cities, tourist attractions, and individuals, are only some of the entities which, willingly or not, are being regularly subjected to the evaluation exercises for the purpose of creating national, regional, and international league tables.

Yet when it comes to the study of rankings, save for a handful of exceptions (e.g. de Rijcke et al. 2016; Soh 2011; Tight 2000), this research has by and large remained within the boundaries of a single empirical setting. This absence of comparative research on rankings, as well as of theoretical and conceptual linkages which would emerge from such studies, is certainly one of the main reasons why we still do not have an overarching framework which could guide empirical research on rankings *across* sectors. A comparative approach would not only lead to a higher level of generality, but would also benefit our theorizing of what is happening in a single setting, including that of higher education (Glaser and Strauss 1999; Lamont 2012; Vaughan 2014).

Furthermore, the research on university rankings, and consequently our knowledge thereof, is strikingly ahistorical. Even though academic rankings have been around for more than a century (Myers and Robe 2009; Usher 2016), the research on contemporary university rankings is rarely interested in comparing and contrasting features of those early and later forms of rankings. We argue that, in order to theorize (university) rankings, we should pay attention to how rankings in a single sector emerge and evolve over time, and not least understand which broader historical and institutional conditions have been affecting the ranking practice over the course of the twentieth century and more recently.

In this chapter we lay down a framework for theorizing university rankings which could be useful for guiding empirical analyses, both within the university field and between that and other fields. The framework can, therefore, be applied to the study of rankings along two

dimensions: (a) *systematic*, which concerns the comparison of university rankings with rankings in other fields and it focuses on how university rankings can be informed by insights from other empirical settings; and (b) *historical*, which concerns long-term trajectories, rather than just the last few years. With these two dimensions on board, we wish to contextualize the analysis of university rankings within a broader sociology of rankings, as well as offer a framework for advancing the sociological theory of rankings.

Comparative research as a way of advancing the theory of university rankings

In much of the literature, university rankings are often implicitly assumed to be, or are treated as, a relatively recent phenomenon which has come as a result of the growing global competition, the rise of neoliberal policies and the worldwide diffusion of Western cultural models in the post-WWII period (e.g. Amsler and Bolsmann 2012; Lynch 2015; Marginson 2015; Shore and Wright 2015). Despite their relative recency as an object of scholarly interest, they have inspired an impressive body of work, which has undoubtedly led not only to the rankings in this particular field being the most studied of all, but also to a better understanding of rankings in general (Rindova et al. 2017).

Nevertheless, attempts at theorizing university rankings are typically oblivious to the literature on rankings and similar phenomena in other fields. If we look at the reference lists of the most cited works on rankings in higher education, in particular those in specialized outlets, we can find few, if any, works on rankings in other fields. This is, however, less often the case in other fields, where higher education rankings are more likely to be referred to (e.g. Buckermann 2018; Jeacle and Carter 2011; Kornberger and Carter 2010; Quak et al. 2019). To some extent at least, this could be explained by the previously mentioned prevalence of university rankings in the larger body of social science literature on rankings, including widely read disciplinary journals (e.g. Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Espeland and Sauder 2007; Sauder and Espeland 2009).

Theorizing rankings essentially requires asking questions such as, why and how do rankings diffuse across social domains, how and why are contemporary rankings different than earlier editions, which social conditions make rankings not only possible but also more likely today,

and why, of all rankings, scholars tend to be mostly interested in the academic ones? Addressing any of these presupposes an understanding that rankings emerged in a context and that they did not just appear overnight; that they are not unique to the university field; or that university rankings are not necessarily more special than those we find in other fields.

We argue that these and similar questions could be fruitfully addressed with a comparative research agenda (Glaser 2006; Lamont 2012; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003). In principle, this implies searching for similarities across contexts, identifying sources of variation, or, as it is often the case, both (Ragin and Zaret 1983; Stinchcombe 1978; Swedberg 2016). This search can be twofold. First, it can refer to the *systematic* or cross-sectoral comparisons of a phenomenon at a single point in time. Here we emphasize the cross-sectoral aspect because we wish to distinguish between comparing, say, the university and the corporate sector, from doing comparisons within a sector at a single point in time such as, for instance, if we would compare rankings in Europe and the US.

The second kind of cross-context comparison we wish to draw attention to is accounting for changing historical circumstances. In addition to adopting the variable-based strategy to further the theory of rankings, we see turning to history and a case-based strategy as another possible way of doing it (Ragin and Zaret 1983). Here the focus is on a single field, in this case higher education, which allows us to look at how rankings evolved from their conception to the present day. Of particular interest are the changing socio-historical circumstances which made the emergence and the institutionalization of rankings possible. We refer to this type of comparisons as *historical*.

Given that doing comparative research on rankings across sectors requires working with structurally very different contexts, we suggest exploring alternative methods of theorizing to the “like and like” kind of comparisons which are typically used to generate linear-causal explanations. The works collected in the volume edited by Deville, Guggenheim, and Hrdličková (2016) offer useful examples of such alternative strategies. For example, Krause (2016) distinguishes between the “like with unlike” comparisons, asymmetrical comparisons, hypothetical comparisons, and undigested comparisons. Which of these strategies should be pursued is, as Krause argues, a question of fitness for purpose.

One such method which has been successfully used in generating theoretical insights is *analogical theorizing* (Vaughan 2004, 2014). Reasoning by analogy is a common form of reasoning in everyday life, but also in specific professional contexts, such as that of legal practice and education (Hinds-Aldrich 2012; Sunstein 1993). In the legal context, for example, the analogy between the precedent and the case at hand is drawn by looking at “both plausibly relevant differences and plausibly relevant similarities” (Sunstein 1993: 745). Theorizing across contexts by using analogy is, nevertheless, not so much about systematically screening two instances of similarities and differences, as much as it is about using insight from other fields to shed light on certain phenomena in the field of interest (Becker 2014; Swedberg 2016). This approach, as Vaughan suggests (2014), can be done at every stage of the research process, from case selection, via concept development and theorizing, to generalizing beyond the case at hand. Importantly, it requires one to see theorizing as a process, rather than as an end product (Weick 1995).

Alternative methods of theorizing hold promise for delivering what King, Felin, and Whetten call “the element of surprise” in theory development (2009: 9). Contrasting different contexts can help us identify aspects of university rankings which those who research university sector alone may consider common or uninteresting even, but which may stand out as unique to this sector when compared to others. It could also help us elucidate certain structural differences between rankings and other types of third-party evaluations, such as ratings or benchmarks. Similarly, historical comparisons could draw our attention to the emergence of new elements in rankings and allow us to see how this specific change affects the entire rankings operation. It is this kind of findings, we argue, which have a great deal of potential for advancing the theory.

Finally, the opportunity to look at one’s primary sector of inquiry through the conceptual or theoretical lens built from the evidence from another sector, could offer the distance from the object of interest, which is necessary for a valid judgement in social sciences (Daston 1992; Linstead 1994). We believe this is especially important for scholars studying universities, given that most of us studying rankings are embedded in the organizations which are direct objects of the rankings which we are set to study and explain. This is, we contend, not a trivial matter. Quite certainly, it is an additional reason to historically contextualize one’s

analysis and to engage in systematic comparisons between higher education and other societal fields, and in doing so keep the necessary distance in check.

Table 1. A typology of approaches to the study of university rankings

	Within the university field	Systematic (across fields)
Snapshot	Analysing university rankings at a single point in time	Comparing university rankings at one point in time with rankings in another field (e.g. culinary, sports, etc.) at the same or different point in time
Historical	Establishing field-specific historical trajectories of university rankings. Comparing university rankings at two or more points in time.	Comparing field-specific historical trajectories of rankings in the university field with those of other field(s)

Table 1 gives an overview of four distinct research strategies one could adopt in researching university rankings. In the following section we look at the field-specific evolution of university rankings, we compare our observations with insights from rankings in two other fields – sports and arts – and highlight similarities and differences of theoretical relevance. We especially focus on the production of rankings and their institutionalization.

Just like in sports?

The earliest experiments with ranking universities are today usually attributed to James McKeen Cattell, a long-time editor of the journal *Science* (Hammarfelt et al. 2017; Myers and Robe 2009; Usher 2016). Although Cattell was not so much interested in comparing universities for universities' sake, as much as he was in identifying which universities were attended by the so-called “eminent men” (as an assumed factor in predicting one's eminence), he did end up producing hierarchical orderings of scientific institutions of his time according to their “scientific strength” (Cattell 1910).

At the time, however, numerical representations, including lists and other types of visual devices, were not at all uncommon (Beniger and Robyn 1978). Throughout the nineteenth

century, population statistics and other kinds of “social data” became not only more widely and more frequently used, but increasingly more public as well (Hacking 1990; Mennicken and Espeland 2019). Numbers were getting a historical momentum and their use diffused rapidly across fields. Rankings, however, as a means of comparing and evaluating performances, occupy a particular place in the history of statistics. One field in which rankings seem to have been most at home already in the nineteenth century, and which had little to do with population counting for purposes of state bureaucracy, was sports (Guttman 1978).

In sports, the practice of not only continuously recording individual achievements, but also of statistically comparing and presenting them to a broad public in form of tables, became an established practice in the mid-to-late nineteenth century. The emergence of rankings, as opposed to statistics more generally, was closely related to the introduction of new types of competition like the league system. What was new about these competitions, and what triggered the production and publication of rankings, was that they determined the “winners” based on the outcome of a *series* of contests over a longer period of time, that is, “the season”. This makes each contest part of an overarching competitive structure, allowing even “champions” to lose once in a while as long as they win frequently enough over the course of the season. Such competitions imply a new, statistical idea of sports performance, which prefers consistency over stellar achievements in individual contests, and they require the regular publication of tables which keep the audience up to date about the overall standing in the league competition (Werron 2013).

Having in mind these historical circumstances, it is little surprising that the turn of the twentieth century gave rise to the first academic rankings. There were, in fact, two things which Cattell’s experiments in reverse-engineering individuals’ eminence had in common with the nineteenth century sports rankings. First, both sports league tables and Cattell’s tables were essentially about comparing performances. Second, in both cases, performances were presented in a numerical table, in which the ranked entities were placed on top of each other, with the one with the highest score at the top, followed by the second-best, and so on.

Throughout the twentieth century, there was a continuous interest in comparing performances of universities and producing different kinds of academic quality rankings, although

this kind of thinking about academic institutions seems to have been specific to the US context (Myers and Robe 2009). Unlike in sports, nowhere yet were the data on universities being collected systematically and regularly, to allow for repeated reproductions of the same kinds of tables. This was likely one of the reasons why Cattell, for example, never reproduced his table in which he compared the “scientific strength” of universities (Hammarfelt et al. 2017).

In this sense, even in the US higher education field, the interest in comparing performances was not followed by the interest in getting universities to compete against each other and this would remain the case for decades after Cattell. Not even reputational surveys, which became a regular practice in assessing quality of US higher education institutions already in the first half of the twentieth century (Usher 2016), were a sufficient condition in this regard, although their taken-for-granted status was probably far from irrelevant. The turning point seem to have come in the 1980s when the first *U.S. News & World Report* undergraduate reputational rankings were published, a development which is now believed to have revolutionized rankings in higher education (Bowman and Bastedo 2009; Hazelkorn 2015; Monks and Ehrenberg 1999; Myers and Robe 2009).

The *U.S. News* rankings were novel in a number of important ways. Two, however, were crucial for transforming the way rankings were being done in higher education. First, the *U.S. News* published its rankings in a highly-circulated news magazine, which also meant that rankings were for the first time produced as news for a far-larger-than-earlier audience. Earlier reputational rankings, in contrast, were meant first and foremost for expert audiences, chiefly scientists and policy makers.¹ This “involvement” of a nation-wide and even a global audience in the rankings effectively made the college performance a matter of public discussion and concern in the US higher education context. The notion of a spectating audience also brought higher education rankings one step closer to sports competitions.

The second important novelty brought by the *U.S. News* was at first repeated and later also *regular* publication of rankings. This introduced the idea that rankings were not only about

¹ With one notable exception, however. The Cartter Report, released in 1966, sold approximately 26,000 copies (Myers and Robe 2009).

measuring performance, but also about the prospect of improving it, from one year to the next. Crucially, therefore, this rendered change in status both expected and tied to performance. Like in sports, already a century earlier, achievement or excellence was now not something which would be measured once or occasionally; rather, it was becoming contingent upon consistency of performance over longer periods (Ringel and Werron 2019).

At the discursive level, this shifted the focus from performances as something which needed to be adequately defined, measured and presented comparatively, to performances as something which was *expected to be improving over time*. This also accentuated the importance of the zero-sum aspect of a hierarchically ordered table, which unequivocally meant that the improvement of performance of one university, expressed as an upward movement in rank, would in principle mean that some other university would be pushed down the hierarchy. Reputation for performance was therefore rendered scarce, which effectively turned higher education institutions into *competitors* for obtaining it.

With the advent of global university rankings at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the idea of rankings as a type of social operation which combines and integrates zero-sum comparison of performances, quantification, visualization, and repeated publication, thus suggesting an idea of competition between universities, was becoming institutionalized globally (Brankovic et al. 2018). Still, even with both field of sports and that of higher education having espoused rankings on a global scale, they still seem to be worlds apart when it comes to the degree to which rankings and competition are accepted as “natural” by all the actors in the respective fields. To understand why this may be the case, we draw an analogy with the field of arts.

Legitimacy, controversy, and institutionalization

It is not as widely known that some of the earliest numerical evaluative lists were found in the field of arts, even as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century (Spoerhase 2014, 2018). Produced by notable art critics and connoisseurs of the time, they would compare artists, such as painters, poets, and musicians. However, these lists were not quite like modern rankings, for at least two reasons. First, they were not published on a continuous basis; similarly like Cattell at the beginning of the twentieth century, these rankers were interested in

capturing more enduring facets of artists' work, what some called "poetic genius" or "aesthetic worth" (Spoerhase 2018). Second, they did not expect the artists to actually improve their performances by competing with each other, not least because many of those ranked were simply not alive anymore.

The practice of quantifying aesthetic judgements nevertheless diffused throughout Europe over the course of the eighteenth century, only to disappear at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Ringel and Werron 2019). The circumstances of this are not entirely known, yet it is speculated that it was in some way related to the fact that the creators of these rankings were not interested in capturing change or improvement in performance, as previously noted, which means that these rankings were not especially geared towards encouraging competitive behaviour of artists. Referring to Becker (1982), Ringel and Werron (2019) also point out that the abandonment of these early experiments in the early nineteenth century might have had to do with the professionalization of art criticism in the nineteenth century. Art critics may have found a plurality of critical narrative voices to be superior to singular judgements of worth, such as those implied in rankings, and therefore better aligned with the interests of critics' guilds at the time.

Another possible explanation was that the idea of quantifying art was not considered legitimate in the discourse of the nineteenth century art critics and writers (Spoerhase 2018). The logic of the artistic field dictates that the improvement in performance and especially comparison with others is, after all, not something artists should be concerned with; on the contrary, the world of art is considered fundamentally antagonistic to practices which involve, among others, external recognition or commodification of the artistic expression (Boltanski and Thévenot 2006; Bourdieu 1996). As Becker contends, "theories of art and criteria by which art, good art, and great art can be distinguished and identified" may be accepted in the field, yet the judgement of artistic work or an artist's oeuvre must take into account a much more complex process, which includes, among others, critics, aestheticians, galleries, audiences, and artists themselves (1982: 360).

This bears some resemblance to the contemporary university rankings whose researchers and critics tend to highlight their reductionist or volatile nature (e.g. Bowden 2000; Saisana et al. 2011; Usher 2009). However, this – essentially methodological – type of critique is often

accompanied with suggestions on how rankings can be further improved and it typically comes from academics interested in measuring science (e.g. Bookstein et al. 2010; Leydesdorff and Opthof 2010; Safón 2013; van Raan 2005). This type of critique, however, could as well be interpreted as a form of accepting rankings, resting on the belief that science indicators and rankings make universities more accountable and help evaluate actors and their performances more objectively than other, qualitative criteria.

There are also other types of critique of university rankings. One is more fundamental in nature as it rejects the idea of rankings as such and especially as a means of evaluating institutional performance (e.g. Curry 2017; Halffman and Radder 2015; Münch 2011). In whichever form they arrive, rankings are seen as “foreign” or “neoliberal” forces that pervert the field and are therefore detrimental for all aspects of university life (Harvey 2008). Some critics in turn focus on the properties of rankers themselves while especially targeting the so-called “commercial rankers”, such as the *U.S. News*, QS, and *Times Higher Education* (THE), due to their alleged profit-motivated interests (Dill 2006; Ordorika and Lloyd 2015).

The weak legitimacy, viewed as a degree of consensus or contestation over performance measurement instruments such as rankings, is certainly hindering their field-wide institutionalization, both in the field of arts and higher education. Contrasting these two fields, however, points to the notion that the presence or perseverance of rankings in a field does not necessarily mean their acceptance: even though rankings in the arts field have been revived in the twentieth century, they are still highly contested and remain confined to the margins of the field (Buckermann 2016; Ringel and Werron 2019).

On the other hand, manifold and persistent criticism does not mean that no institutionalization is taking place either. Despite the critique, university rankings continue to occupy a central place in the contemporary public discourse in higher education – much like rankings themselves. This may not make rankings more accepted or less contested in the long run, but it may naturalize the discussion on rankings in the field, which can also be seen as a form of institutionalization (Ringel and Werron 2019). The role of rankers in this is not to be undetermined: some of these organizations, among which *U.S. News* and *THE* stand out, have become remarkably successful in mobilizing attention of all the relevant actors in the field. The *U.S. News* may especially be worthwhile observing in this case, given its role as a ranker in

more than one field: not only does it rank higher education institutions, but also hospitals, law firms, vacation destinations, and – cars. This multi-field presence of *U.S. News* is a case in point when it comes to understanding the global institutionalization of rankings, its underlying idea that competition should be public, and perhaps crucially, the roles that the media and their relationship with audiences play in this.

A framework for historical and systematic comparative research on rankings

Based on our observations on the field-specific trajectories of rankings across the fields of sports, arts, and higher education, it becomes clearer what modern university rankings are about. This allows us to develop a framework for the comparative analysis of rankings in both systematic and historical perspective. As opposed to their predecessors, such as the early art “rankings” from the eighteenth century or the early-twentieth century university rankings, modern rankings seem to combine and integrate four sub-operations: *zero-sum comparison of performances, quantification, visualization, and repeated publication* (Werron and Ringel 2017). The former two sub-operations constitute rankings’ informative dimension which is chiefly concerned with collecting and organizing information about the ranked entities. The latter two sub-operations, on the other hand, are performative in nature and their purpose is to communicate the information about the ranked entities to various audiences (Brankovic et al. 2018).

This concept has heuristic implications for in-depth comparative studies on rankings. An advantage of this definition is that it allows us to distinguish rankings from other forms of performance measurement, such as ratings and benchmarks (Brankovic et al. 2018). These other types of comparison, for example, do not suggest zero-sum relationships. Ratings are not always visualized by means of an open-ended hierarchical table, while rankings exclusively are, and this is one of their defining characteristics. To produce and reproduce competition, the comparisons of performances need not only to be zero-sum, quantified and visualized, but they also need to be published on a regular basis. In other words, each of the rankings’ four sub-operation is a necessary condition, yet none on its own is sufficient for transforming a stable status order into a dynamic competitive field (Brankovic et al. 2018).

An important feature of this conceptualization of rankings is that it integrates Georg Simmel's triadic model of competition (1903, 1950). This model requires the participation of (at least) two competitors struggling for the scarce favour of (at least) a third party whose principal role is to observe and evaluate the competitors' offers. All modern rankers, be they in the university or any other field, have this role in common, yet, as we have seen, the way this role materializes can both change over time and vary across fields. Adding to Simmel's model, our analysis reveals that modern rankings require the existence of not one, but rather *two distinct third parties*: rankers and their publics (or audiences). Notably, these audiences remain largely fictitious in character and they only exist through being represented by other third parties such as rankers in this case (see Werron 2010, 2015 for an elaboration).

Future empirical studies on rankings could explore new ways or other types of fields for comparing, contrasting, or for drawing analogies with, which could shed a new light on the field of higher education. This includes, most notably, the question of how each element of modern rankings is embedded in broader discursive environments, such as the novel notions of "performance" (Verheyen 2018), competition (Werron 2015), and transparency (Ringel 2017), which favour the production of rankings and might have helped institutionalize them in all of these fields. Future research, on this basis, could also explore avenues for studying the effects of rankings on organizations historically in the field of higher education and systematically across two or more fields. Such investigations hold promise for exposing the antecedents and the variability in the degree of coupling between, on the one hand, publicly suggested templates of competition such as rankings and, on the other, perceptions, beliefs, and the behaviour of organizations.

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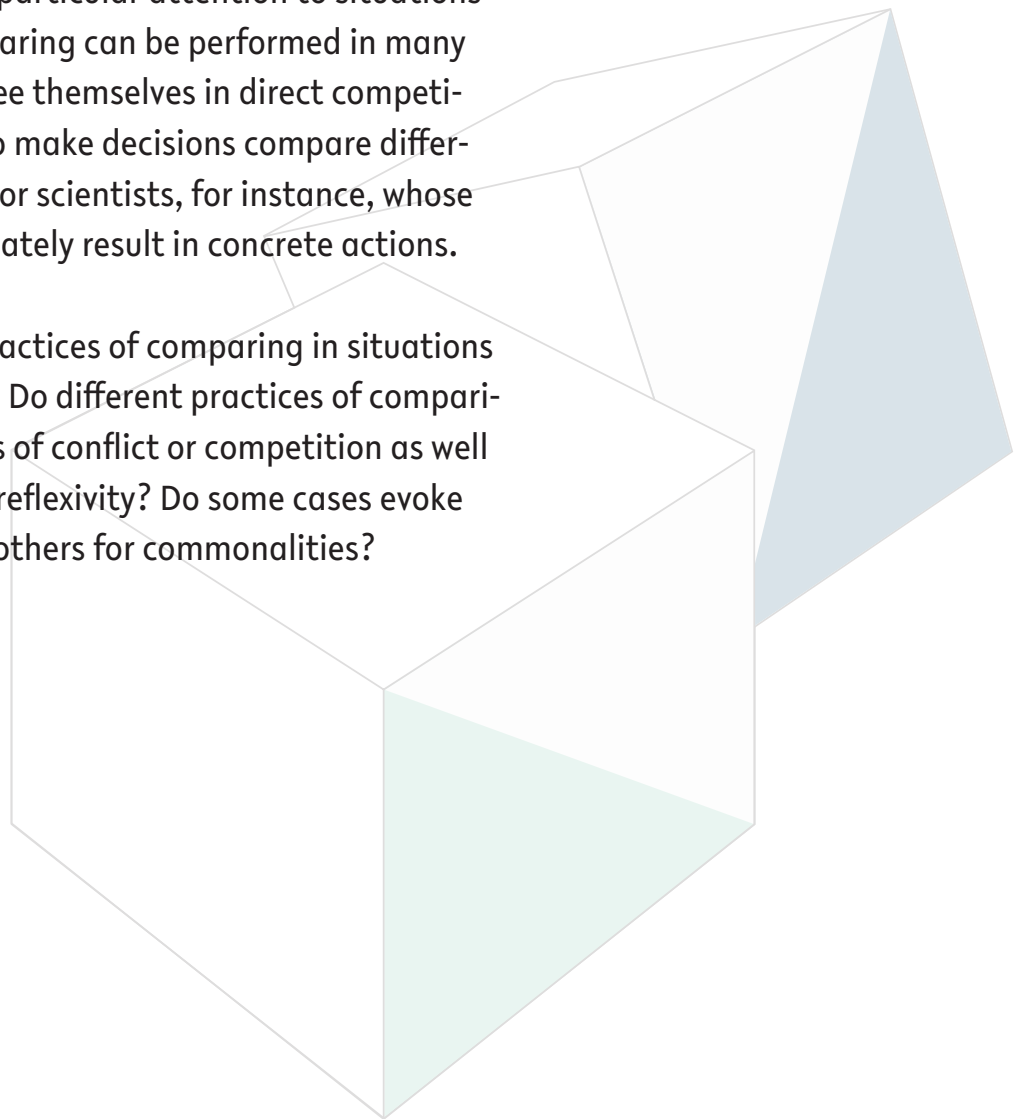
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PROJECT AREA A – CONFLICT AND COMPETITION

By placing the act of comparing at the heart of the SFB, it focuses on a practice that has multiple shapes and forms. Therefore, the projects pay particular attention to situations and contexts in which comparing can be performed in many different ways. Those who see themselves in direct competition with others and have to make decisions compare differently than writers of fiction or scientists, for instance, whose comparisons do not immediately result in concrete actions.

Project area A focuses on practices of comparing in situations of conflict and competition. Do different practices of comparison get formed in situations of conflict or competition as well as in social spaces of (self-)reflexivity? Do some cases evoke looking for differences and others for commonalities?



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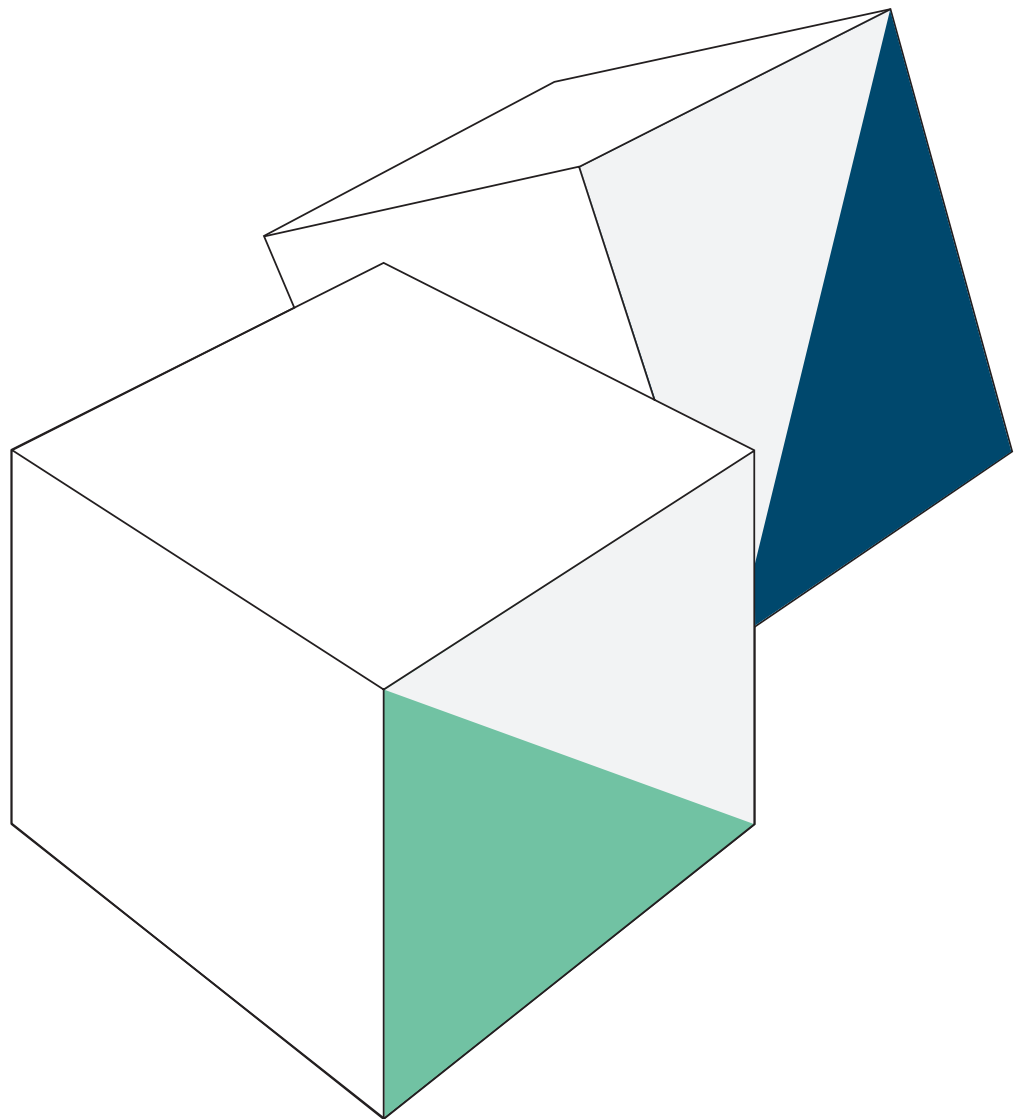
Our everyday life is shaped by ratings, statistics and competition, whether it is sports, politics or science. To compare is believed to be objective. It supposedly helps us to obtain clear results. But how neutral is it to compare?

People compare themselves regarding their qualities and skills, companies compare their finances, countries their gross domestic product. To compare, for instance, influences how we perceive the other: Is it similarities or differences that get to stand out? Which judgements do we reach? When and why do habitual opinions sneak into the allegedly impartial act of comparing?

Researchers working in fields of history, literary studies, philosophy, art history, political science and law are for the first time studying how comparative practices order and change the world. The Collaborative Research Centre (SFB) 1288 “Practices of Comparing“ is conducting fundamental research by shifting the focus from ‘the comparison’ to a ‘practice of comparing’: What do agents do when they compare?

One objective is to raise awareness to the fact that the allegedly natural practice of comparing is never innocent, objective or neutral.

By studying an essential practice of order and dynamics in modern but also premodern, European and non-European societies, the SFB aims to contribute to a model for rethinking history, societies and historical change in the context of the latest historical and cultural theories.



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